



Are the kids alright?

Young Australians in their middle years

Final summary report of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project



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Overview

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project was conducted by researchers at the Flinders University of South Australia, UNSW Australia (The University of New South Wales), and the Australian Council for Educational Research. It was funded by the Australian Research Council through a Linkage Grant (LP120100543), and supported by Partner Organisations: the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, the Australian Government Department of Social Services, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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For more information about the project, please visit: www.australianchildwellbeing.com.au

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Executive summary

Compared with the early years and adolescence, young people in their middle years (ages 8-14 years) have received relatively little attention from policymakers other than in the space of academic achievement, where national curriculums have been developed, and a national testing regime is in place. Yet there is growing recognition that this is a critical time when young people experience rapid physical and mental development, in addition to facing a significant transition from primary to secondary school.

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project (ACWP) asked young people about their lives and wellbeing during this crucial period. Wellbeing can be seen as comprising a broad range of objective circumstances that young people experience, social relationships that they engage in, and their perceptions of these circumstances and relationships. This summary report focuses on four factors that have emerged as important influences on young people's wellbeing: hunger and severe deprivation, missing school, experience of pressure from schoolwork, and support networks that protect young people's wellbeing.

Key Findings

- Most young people in their middle years are doing well. They report high average levels of wellbeing with respect to their objective circumstances, relationships and how they perceive their lives. They are effectively taking advantage of the opportunities available to them, for example in the space of education.
- However, a significant proportion of young people in their middle years have low wellbeing, and are missing out on opportunities at this crucial time. This is manifested in:
 - High levels of health complaints
 - Experience of bullying
 - Low levels of engagement at school
 - Low levels of subjective wellbeing
 - Low levels of social support
- Low wellbeing is concentrated in groups of young people who are recognised as marginalised - young people with disability, young carers, materially disadvantaged young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, Indigenous young people, young people in rural and remote Australia and young people in out of home care.
- Different forms of low wellbeing are linked – outcomes in one domain are often associated with outcomes in other domains. For example, high **pressure from schoolwork**, reported by 15% of boys and 23% of girls in Year 8, is related to high levels of health complaints, seen by experts as an indicator of stress.
- Almost one young person in five (19%) in the survey reported **going hungry** to school or to bed. These young people are more likely to **miss school** frequently.
- Both young people who go hungry and the one in ten who miss school frequently are likely to experience high levels of health complaints, frequent bullying, and low levels of engagement at school.

- Young people who are in a marginalised group are more likely than others to go hungry, miss school, and experience its identified correlates of health complaints, bullying and low engagement at school.
- Family and social networks provide support to young people. Young people with smaller support networks have low average levels of wellbeing than those with larger networks.

Implications

The manifestations of low wellbeing are evident in matters of direct concern to policy. Marginalised young people who go hungry, miss school or experience high pressure from schoolwork are likely to miss out on opportunities for healthy development and strengthening their human capital. The disadvantage that they experience in childhood may follow them into adulthood. Governments now recognise that addressing these complex issues requires joined-up approaches that reach across policy silos. For example, schools cannot on their own address hunger or frequent absences, but they have a direct interest in reducing them.

Australian governments need to agree on a set of priorities for young people in their middle years, and especially marginalised young people, that encompass opportunities for their healthy development. This includes development of their human and social capital, of which academic achievement is just one element. Policy can act most directly on objective issues such as hunger and missing school.

Investment in targets such as these will advance young people's capabilities in the space of health, human capital development, and wellbeing. But in order to act effectively, governments should foster an appreciation of the complex roots of these problems. Governments need to develop policies that are sensitive to the needs of young people who are marginalised, and the role that family and social networks can play in supporting them. This suggests it is necessary to consult with young people on their aims and aspirations, and the challenges they face in realising them.



Introduction

Little is known about wellbeing in the middle years

Maximising wellbeing is a core goal for society, and for policy. For children and young people in particular, the level of wellbeing attained will have profound and long-lasting effects on their transition to adulthood. However, more is currently known about the wellbeing of younger children and adolescents than of young people in their 'middle years' (ages 8-14), even though this group faces many demanding challenges as they transition into adolescence.

Young people are experts in their own lives

People's wellbeing is built on several components. Identification of these components, and understanding how they are inter-related, is necessary if policy is to advance people's wellbeing. Actions by government designed to raise wellbeing are unlikely to succeed if they are not founded on a solid, evidence-based understanding of the factors and processes that comprise and influence wellbeing. And any such understanding must be based on people's own accounts and experiences of what matters for them, and what they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). This is becoming increasingly understood when it comes to adults, but exactly the same lines of reasoning apply to children and young people, who are the primary experts when it comes to unpacking what contributes to wellbeing, what detracts from it and what actions are required to improve it.

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project (ACWP) that is described in this report is based on the arguments and ideas set out above. Most importantly, the project started from the premise that any attempt to understand wellbeing among young people must place their ideas and experiences at the centre and must be grounded in their lived experience.

Policy needs to be informed by robust data

With a child-centred approach, the research began by talking in detail with young people, in small groups and individually, in order to identify the broad domains that constitute their wellbeing. These discussions involved a wide range of young people, including many belonging to marginalised groups - young people with disability, materially disadvantaged young people, Indigenous young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, young people in rural and remote Australia, and young people in out of home care. One of the main aims of the project was to understand the diversity in wellbeing that exists across young people in their middle years, and to provide information for policy that focuses in particular on disparities between 'mainstream' or non-marginalised young Australians, and those who are most disadvantaged.

Discussions on what is important in young people's lives were used to develop a survey questionnaire that could be circulated to a large national sample in order to provide a comprehensive statistical picture of wellbeing among young Australians in their middle years, how wellbeing varies among different groups, and the processes that link different forms of wellbeing together.

This summary report presents some key findings from the study. While the in-depth discussions with young people and the survey covered a wide range of topics, the summary report focuses on four issues in particular because they are important as indicators for policy, and because they illustrate some of the interconnections between different domains of wellbeing: hunger as a manifestation of poverty; missing school; pressure from schoolwork; and support networks. The report also discusses policy implications that flow from the analysis.



Young people's wellbeing as a policy concern

Wellbeing is a policy priority for Australian governments

Improving the wellbeing of Australia's population is a policy priority for Australian governments. This is expressed in the Treasury's Wellbeing Framework, which provides a rationale for policy intervention "that extends beyond narrow measures of living standards." (Gorecki and Kelly, 2012: 27) With respect to children and young people, strategic policy documents, including the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), and Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy (COAG, 2009) highlight the importance of adopting a perspective that recognises the whole child, "across cognitive, learning, physical, social, emotional and cultural dimensions" (COAG, 2009: 4).

Through these documents Australian governments emphasise a national aspiration towards maximising of individual opportunity. This includes the aspirations that a young person's background (including culture, disability, family circumstances, socio-economic status and remoteness) should not influence his/her achievements, and that the gap in key social and economic outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people should be closed.

The Australian Treasury (Gorecki and Kelly, 2012) has proposed a wellbeing framework that covers the following dimensions:

- The set of opportunities available to people, including good health, environmental amenity, leisure, personal and social activities, community participation and political rights and freedoms.
- The distribution of opportunities across the Australian people, so all Australians have the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life and participate meaningfully in society.
- The sustainability of those opportunities available over time, including across generations.
- The overall level and allocation of risk borne by individuals and the community, including concern for the ability of individuals to manage the level and nature of the risks they face.

The role of policy is to maximise opportunities

If wellbeing is conceptualised as opportunities, then the role of policy is to ensure that opportunities are maximised, that they are equitably distributed, that they are sustainable over time, and that there is balance in the allocation of risk between individual and community in the pursuit of these opportunities. Wellbeing requires that basic human needs are met (OECD, 2011), but also involves an element of subjectivity. That is, people's views on their own lives matter. People – including young people – have a right to be heard on matters that they consider to be important to them (UNICEF, 2007).

Young people value the opportunities that the Treasury Wellbeing Framework seeks to maximise

What young people value – those domains and issues that constitute their wellbeing – is directly related to the Treasury's wellbeing framework in practical ways. The ACWP has aimed to provide policymakers with evidence on factors associated with young people's opportunities to overcome disadvantage and marginalisation, to avoid deprivation, to experience good health, to maximise their human capital development, and to contribute towards the nation's wellbeing into adulthood.

The findings in this report were developed with young people themselves as the starting point and focus. A national survey of young people in their middle years was conducted in order to measure their wellbeing in domains that they nominated as important – family, school, health and friends, and issues that are associated with their wellbeing in these domains, for example, material wellbeing and bullying. These domains and issues are not just important for young people themselves. They are also determinants of 'a person's substantive freedom to lead a life they have reason to value' (to use the Treasury's words, borrowed from Nobel Prize Winner Amartya Sen). What young people value is not only important for them in the here and now, but also for their healthy development towards adulthood. The middle years are a crucial period in this process of development.



The Australian Child Wellbeing Project

The ACWP used the perspectives of young people in their middle years (ages 8-14) to conceptualise and measure their wellbeing. Young people identified the issues that matter to them in focus group discussions and interviews. Their views informed the design of a national survey which has in turn have been analysed in concert with information from the focus group discussions and interviews. Further in-depth discussions with young people have been conducted to follow up on issues arising from the survey data analysis.

The project therefore combines width through a representative survey, and depth in young people's perspectives on specific issues. Utilising this approach, it builds on previous child centred research on the relationship between marginalisation and opportunities for young people (Skattebol, Saunders, Redmond et al., 2012).

The overall project was divided into six major phases:

Phase 1: Obtaining young people's conceptualisations of wellbeing Qualitative research was conducted with specific groups of 'marginalised' young people (see Box 1) as well as some non-marginalised or 'mainstream' young people. The discussions produced information regarding what the young people thought was important for a good life, and the challenges they faced in having a good life.

Phase 2: Developing wellbeing indicators Indicators of wellbeing were developed and tested with some groups of marginalised young people, and a draft survey instrument was constructed. The survey instrument included several items that allowed comparison of young people's wellbeing in Australia with that of young people in other countries.

Phase 3: Field Trial Survey A Field Trial was conducted in ten schools in NSW and Victoria. The purpose of this phase was to pilot test the survey with students in Years 4, 6 and 8.

Phase 4: National survey A nationally representative sample of schools was invited to participate in the study. The survey was conducted in 180 schools. In total, 5,440 students participated. Only students who had obtained written parental consent, and who themselves consented, could participate.

Phase 5: Analysis and further fieldwork Analysis of the survey data was accompanied by further in-depth qualitative fieldwork, the aim of which was to deepen understanding of key issues arising from the survey analysis.

Phase 6: Deposit of survey instruments and data in a public archive A key aim of the project was to produce knowledge that could be used by others. An anonymised survey dataset and documentation is available from the Australian Data Archive at the Australian National University for free use by bona fide researchers.

This summary report highlights key findings from the study and draws attention to issues that policy needs to address to improve the wellbeing of young Australians and especially to maximise opportunities for marginalised young people. While the full final report for the study describes findings across all domains investigated (notably, family, school, health and relationships with peers), this report focuses on four issues that demonstrate disparities in wellbeing between marginalised and non-marginalised young Australians, and underline the importance of understanding associations between different domains of wellbeing: hunger; missing school; pressure from schoolwork; and the role of support networks.

Box 1: Marginalised groups

The project focused on seven groups of young people who are recognised by policymakers, and by many in the Australian community, as marginalised.

Young people with disability: about 11% of the survey sample (569 participants) identified as being with disability. This proportion is slightly larger than the proportions of young people in their middle years who are identified in other national surveys (usually by parents or carers) as being with disability. No information was collected from survey participants on the type of disability that they lived with.

Young carers: 9% of the survey sample (484 participants) identified as engaging in caring work for a family member with a disability or chronic illness, mental illness, or drug/alcohol addiction. No information was sought on whether the young carer was the primary carer, or whether they supported someone else who was the primary carer.

Materially disadvantaged young people were identified according to their responses to a set of four questions on household assets – the number of cars, vans or trucks the family possessed, the number of computers in the home, the number of holidays taken in the past year, and whether the survey participant had their own bedroom. Responses were aggregated into a Family Affluence Scale that was used to differentiate between materially disadvantaged participants and others. Using this approach, 505 survey participants (10% of the sample) were defined as materially disadvantaged.

Culturally and linguistically diverse young people (423 participants; 8% of the sample) were identified by their responses to a question on the language they spoke at home most of the time – English, or another language. No specific information on which languages (other than English) were spoken.

Indigenous young people were identified through a question asking if they were Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both. A total of 245 participants (4.5% of the sample) identified as Indigenous.

Rural and remote young people (120 survey participants; 2% of the total sample) were identified according to the location school that they went to. If the address of the school was classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as being in a rural or remote area, then the survey participants attending that school were classified as 'rural and remote'.

Young people in Out of Home Care comprised less than 2% of the sample, with 84 participants. These young people self-identified through questions on who they lived with. It is important to point out that a large percentage of young people in out of home care live with family members, and it is unclear whether they would have identified as being in out of home care.

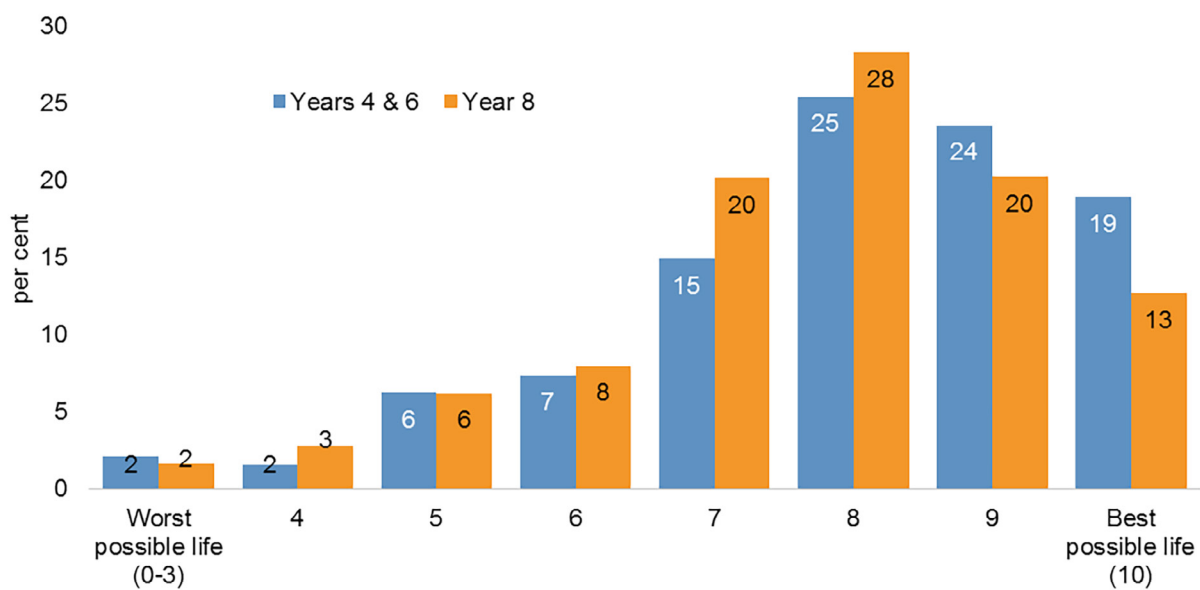
There is a lot of overlap between the different marginalised groups. For example, 17/84 young people in out of home care (20%) identified as Indigenous; 107 young carers (22%) reported living with disability; and 80 culturally and linguistically diverse young people (20%) were materially disadvantaged. These overlaps reflect realities in the population of young people in Australia, where different forms of marginalisation frequently overlap. Note that the analysis in this report mostly covers the first five of the above groups, as the numbers of survey participants classified as 'rural and remote' and 'out of home care' are small.

Summary wellbeing indicators

Young Australians typically rate their wellbeing highly

Overall, young Australians in their middle years rate their wellbeing highly. Figure 1 shows how young people in primary school (Years 4 and 6) and secondary school (Year 8) rated their quality of life on a scale of 0 ('the worst possible life') to 10 ('the best possible life').¹ The figure shows that over four out of every five gave themselves a score on the ladder of seven or more.

Figure 1: Scores on the Quality of life scale, by year level (per cent)



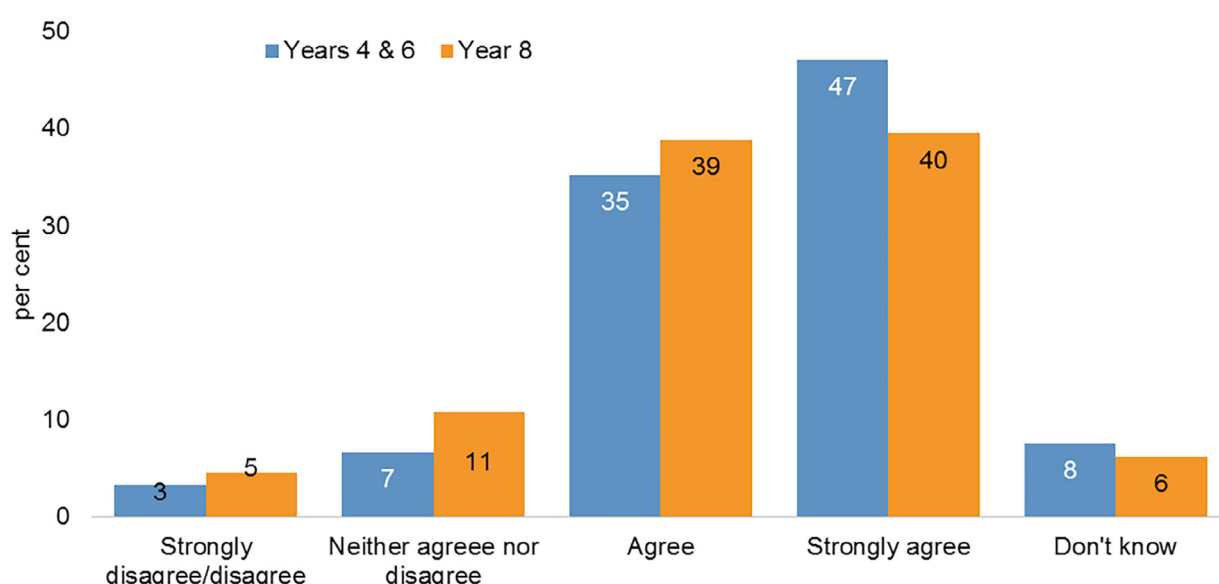
¹ All statistical data from the ACWP survey in this summary report are weighted, unless otherwise noted. All findings are reported with confidence intervals, and, where appropriate p-values to denote significance of differences in the full final ACWP report. See www.australianchildwellbeing.com.au

Most young people feel positive about their futures

The majority of young Australians in their middle years have a positive outlook on life. Figure 2 shows that about eight in ten survey participants in both Years 4 and 6 and in Year 8 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel positive about my future'. Other survey indicators also suggest that young people positively view different aspects of their lives. For example:

- the majority of survey participants reported talking and having fun with their family most days.
- over eight in ten reported having three or more friends.
- most young people reported that they received high levels of support from teachers.
- about three quarters of survey participants aspired to university as their highest level of education, while only about one in twenty thought that they would not finish Year 12 or go on to further education or training.

Figure 2: Responses to the statement 'I feel positive about my future', by year level (per cent)



Moreover, indicators in the ACWP survey that can be compared with indicators in surveys conducted in other countries show that young Australians are generally doing well. For example, the score that young Australians give for their quality of life is close to the average for other high-income countries. Young Australians' reports of having smoked tobacco or been drunk in the month before they were surveyed also appear to be lower than in most other countries.²

² Using comparison questions drawn from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study (HBSC). See the the full final ACWP report at www.australianchildwellbeing.com.au

A significant share of young people experience low wellbeing

The data presented thus far are averages for all young Australians in their middle years. The averages, however, hide considerable disparities, suggesting differences in young people's lived experience. For example:

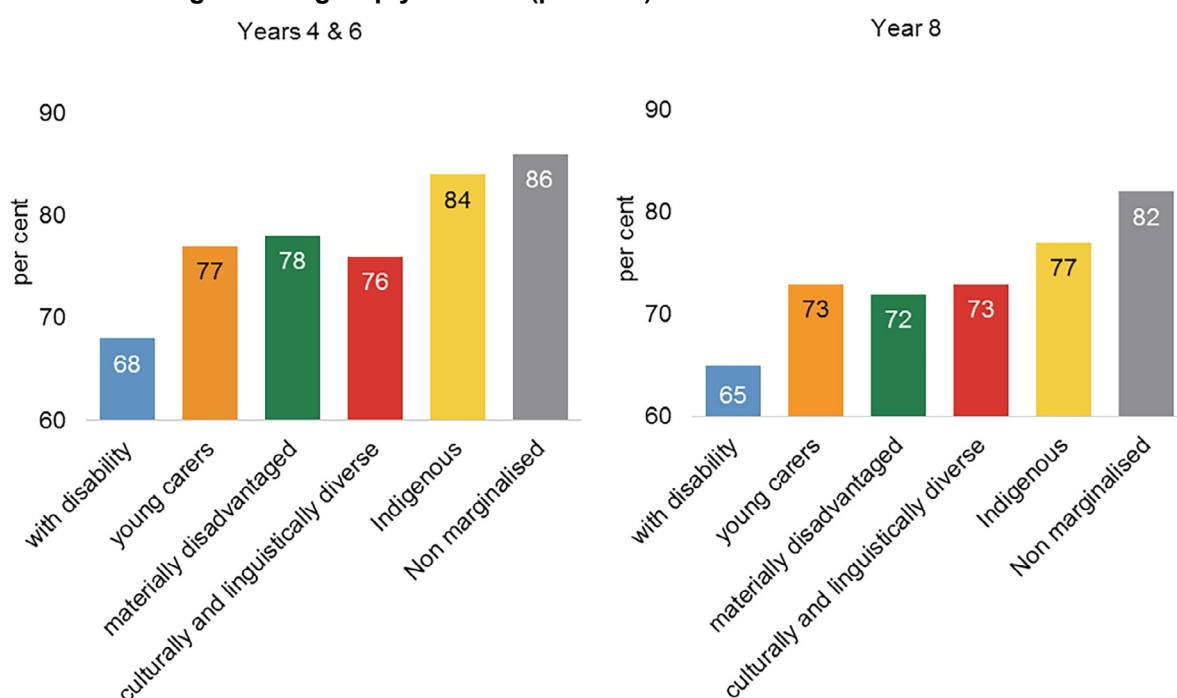
- 31% reported experiencing at least two health complaints (for example, headache, stomach ache, sleeplessness, feeling nervous) more than once a week. These complaints often occur together, and are often associated with stress.
- 19% reported going to school or bed hungry, at least sometimes.
- 17% reported being bullied (for example, being ganged up on, ignored, teased, made to feel afraid) about once a week or more often.
- 14% reported low levels of school satisfaction.
- 10% reported missing school weekly or more often in the last term.
- 9% reported being close to only one person (including friends & family members), or close to no-one.

These indicators are often related. Low wellbeing in one domain (for example, health) is often associated with low wellbeing in other domains (for example, experience of bullying).

Low wellbeing is associated with marginalisation

Moreover, low wellbeing in any domain is not a matter of chance. Young people who are marginalised are more likely to experience poor outcomes in any domain than young people who are not marginalised. Figure 3 shows that the proportion of young people who agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I feel positive about my future' varies considerably between non-marginalised and marginalised groups, with young people in most of the five biggest marginalised groups reporting lower levels of agreement.

Figure 3: Agreement with the statement 'I feel positive about my future', by marginalised group year level (per cent)





***Marginalised
young people
reported more
health complaints***

Figure 4 shows that young people in all marginalised groups in Years 4 and 6 reported considerably more health complaints than young people who were not in any marginalised group. The same is true of young people in all marginalised groups in Year 8, except those who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

Figure 4: Participants reporting two or more health complaints at least weekly, by year level (per cent)

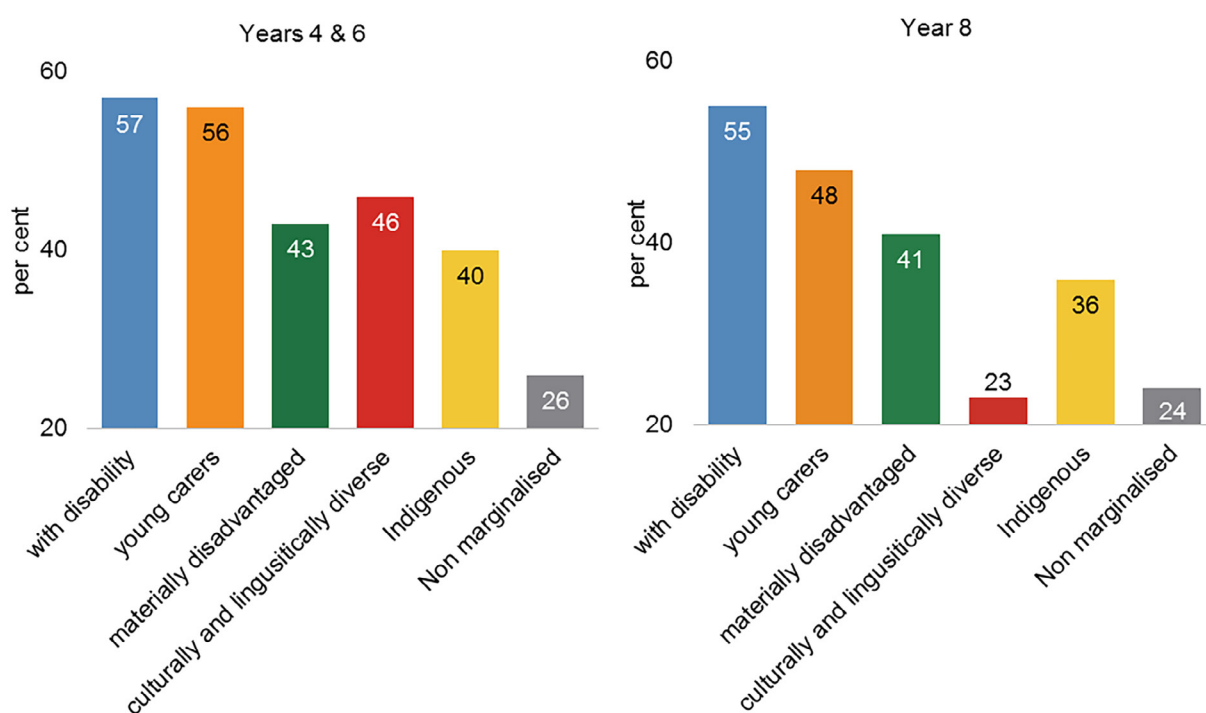


Figure 5 shows that survey participants in all five marginalised groups in Years 4 and 6 reported higher levels of bullying than non-marginalised survey participants. Young people in some of the marginalised groups in Year 8 also experienced high levels of bullying, especially young people with disability, one of whom reported:

Some of the kids throw stuff at my head.

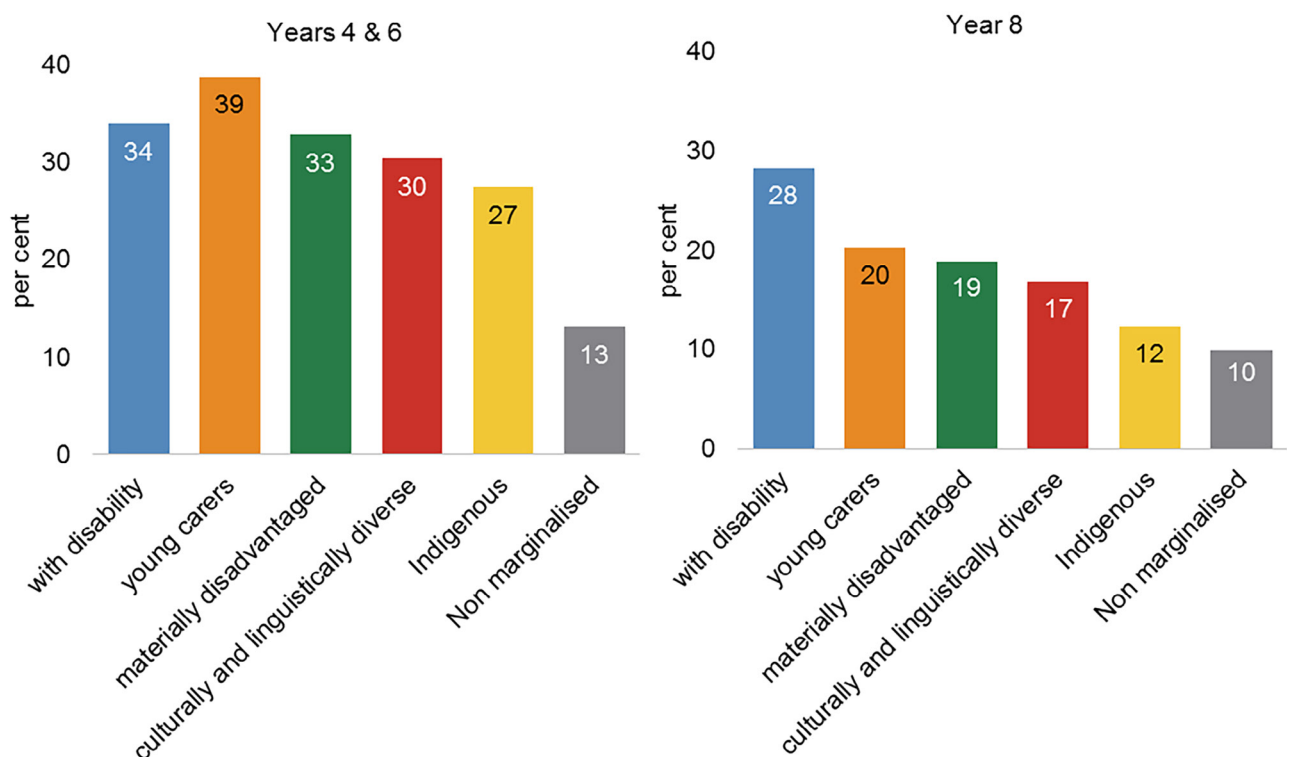
Another reported more covert forms of bullying at school:

It's not dangerous, I just don't feel comfortable there.

**Marginalised
young people are
bullied more often**

Indeed, the issue of bullying, both at school and in the neighbourhood, was frequently raised during discussions with young people with disability.

Figure 5: Participants reporting that they were bullied at least weekly, by year level (per cent)



Disparities in young people's wellbeing can impact adversely on their healthy development. This suggests the need for policy to better understand the processes in neighbourhoods and communities, in education and in other forms of service provision which serve to exclude and marginalise some young people, while actively including and supporting others.

The remainder of this summary report focuses on the four issues noted above: material disadvantage and hunger, missing school, school pressure, and support networks. These issues are important in their own right as motivators for policy action. As the analysis in this report shows, they are also associated with health complaints, and experience of bullying. Moreover, young people's achievements with respect to these indicators are relevant to their opportunities to develop to their full potential.

Material disadvantage and hunger

The proportion of children in poverty in Australia, while close to the average for OECD countries, is high in comparison with the best performing nations (OECD, 2015) and has not decreased in recent years (Australian Council of Social Service, 2014). This study shows how poverty indicators are associated with low wellbeing for young Australians, and with missing out on opportunities for learning.

Hunger impacts on opportunities

Hunger is an extreme manifestation of poverty. Adequate food is a basic need, and hunger is not a relative condition. It can also be seen, to use Amartya Sen's phrase, as absolute capability deprivation in young people's lives (Sen, 1983, 1999).

There is a growing information base on risk of hunger experienced by Australian families. Research based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data suggests that about one in twenty Australians experienced food insecurity in 2004-5 (Temple, 2008). The charity Foodbank Australia (2014) reports that it assists half a million Australians with food relief every month, and estimates that about one third of these are children. Many schools run breakfast clubs for disadvantaged students. Teachers report that students who are hungry find it difficult to concentrate, and often have learning difficulties or behavioural problems (Foodbank, 2015). Extensive qualitative research describes how and why families run out of food, and how they cope when this happens (King, Moffitt and Carter, 2012; Skattebol et al., 2012).

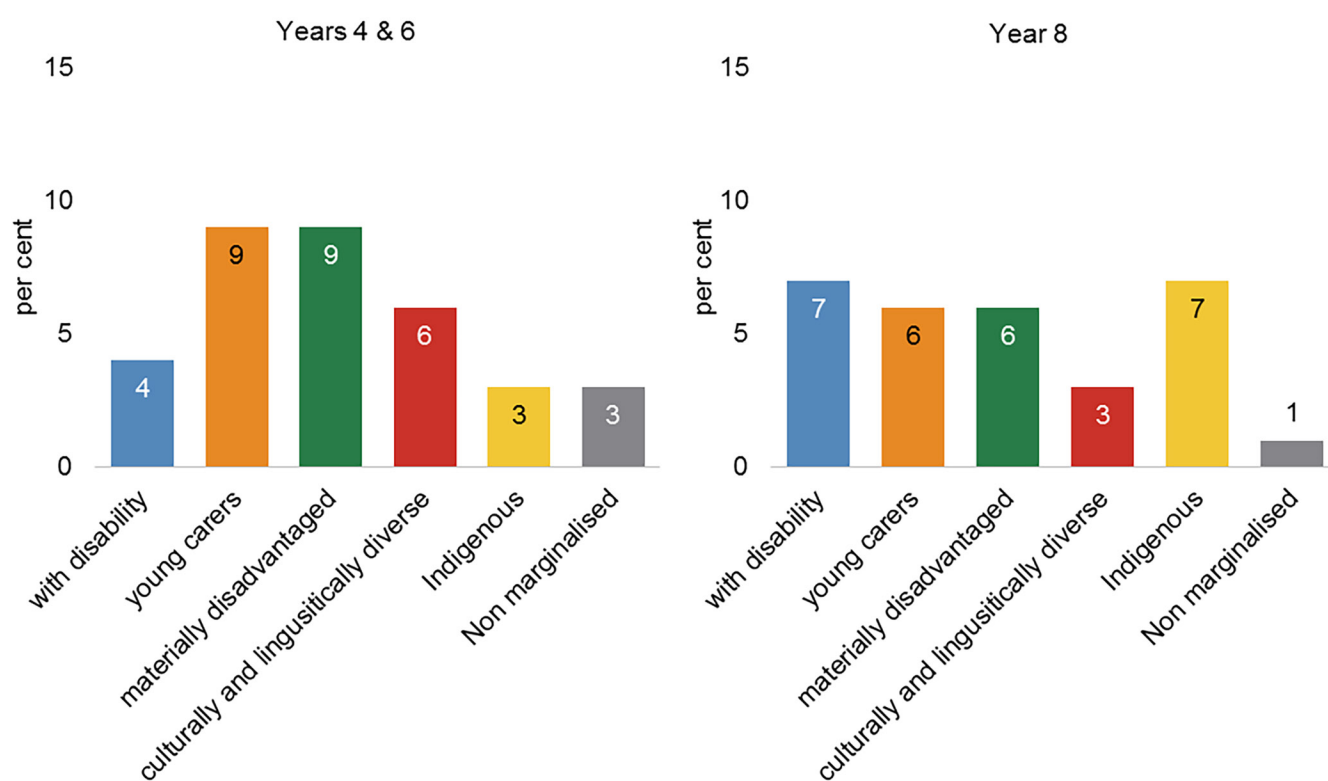
3% - nearly one young person in every classroom - often go to school or bed hungry

The ACWP asked survey participants if they ever went to school or bed hungry because there was not enough food at home. Fifteen per cent of participants said they went to school or bed hungry 'sometimes', while about 3% said they always or often went to school or bed hungry. Figure 6 shows that the percentage of young people who reported always or often going to school or bed hungry is greater among young people in most marginalised groups than it is among young people who are not marginalised. For example, the proportion of materially disadvantaged young people and young carers in Years 4 and 6 who reported always or often going to school or bed hungry is three times the proportion among the non-marginalised group.





Figure 6: Marginalised and non-marginalised participants who often go to school or bed hungry (per cent)

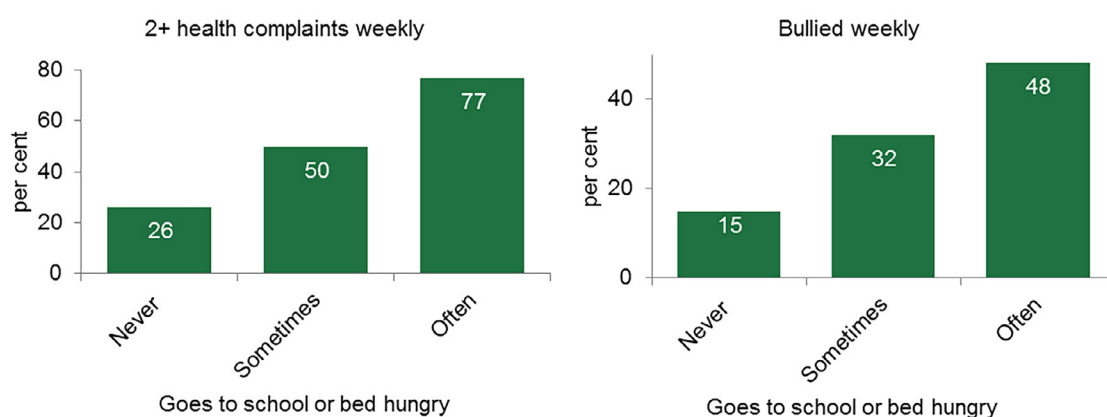


Hunger is associated with lower school engagement

The survey findings also indicate that hunger is associated with lower levels of engagement in schooling. Participants who reported going hungry to school or bed often were considerably less likely to report that they were satisfied at school, that they had a supportive relationship with their teacher, or that their performance at school compared with their peers was good.

In addition, they were more likely to report being bullied. Figure 7 shows that almost half of the young people in Years 4 and 6 who often went to school or bed hungry reported being bullied at least weekly, compared with fewer than one in five of those who never went school or bed hungry. The proportion of those reporting two or more health complaints weekly was also about three times as high among those who reported often going hungry compared with those who never went hungry.

Figure 7: Experiencing two or more health complaints or bullying at least weekly, by going to school hungry, Years 4 & 6 (per cent)



Hunger happens when money is short

Discussions with young people indicated that running short of money to buy food was often part of a vicious cycle in families who young people described as lurching from one payday to the next. Taylah (aged 11) and Billie (aged 14) talked about what happened when their families ran out of food.³ Taylah lived with her mum who was working and got paid fortnightly, but often ran short just before payday.

Mum always runs out of money and she has to borrow it and then she has to pay it back and then we don't have enough money to get food and stuff.

Billie reported:

My mum doesn't like having [my friend] over when there isn't much food; she gets ashamed like she is going to go tell her mum. In case she says we didn't have much for dinner tonight.

Experiencing food shortages was often more extreme when there was a confluence of significantly adverse events in a young person's life. Events sometimes included a family member getting sick or dying, the break-up of a relationship in the household, or having to move homes for another reason. These adverse events combined with 'everyday' economic stress to create considerable uncertainty in young people's lives.

³ Taylah and Billie were interviewed by the authors for the project Making a Difference (Skattebol et al., 2012).

Missing school

Attendance at school is compulsory for young people in their middle years unless alternative approved educational arrangements are in place. The links between missing school and other life outcomes are widely acknowledged. One recent Australian study has noted that missing school frequently:

... is associated with a greater chance of dropping out of school for both mainstream and ethnic minority groups, disruptive behaviour, and may lead to a cycle of rebellion against authority. These outcomes have later implications for employment, a range of health risk behaviours (drug and alcohol abuse), homelessness, poverty, welfare dependence, and involvement in the justice system. (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence et al., 2013: 13)

One in ten miss school once a week or more

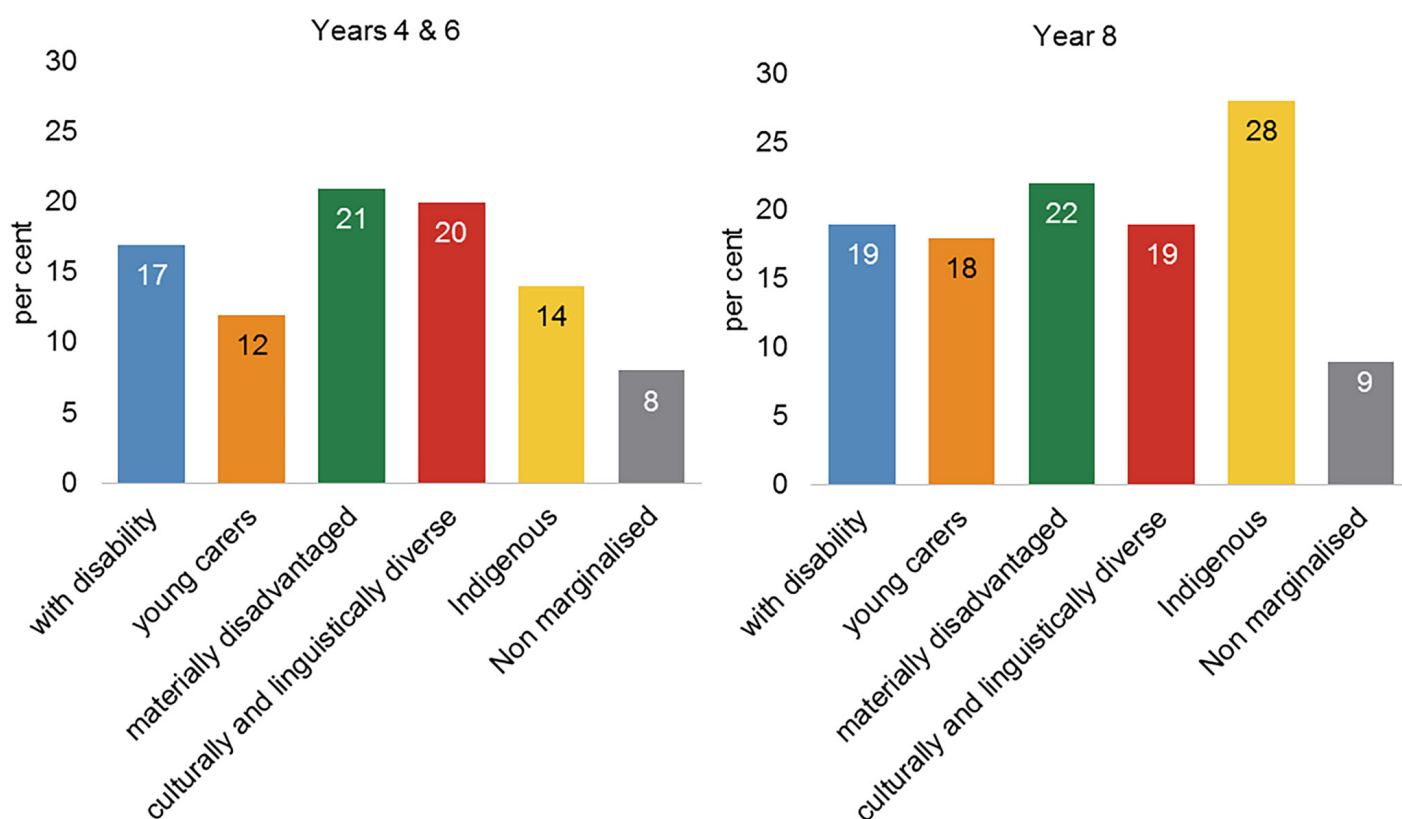
The ACWP survey included a question regarding the frequency of absence from school. Reasons for absences were not sought, nor was information about the duration of absences. Across all year levels, at least seven in ten participants reported 'never' or 'hardly ever' missing school during the past term. In contrast, one in ten participants reported that in the past term they had been absent about once a week or more.





Figure 8 shows that young people in the marginalised groups were generally more likely than nonmarginalised young people to miss school frequently (about once a week or more). The difference in percentages who reported being absent are particularly notable among young people in Year 8. In all five marginalised groups, the proportion reporting frequent absence from school is about twice or more the proportion of non-marginalised young people who reported missing school frequently. These findings are consistent with data from other research showing that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds have significantly lower attendance rates, especially in secondary school, than other students (Hancock et al., 2013).

Figure 8: Missing school about every week or more, by year and marginalised group (per cent)



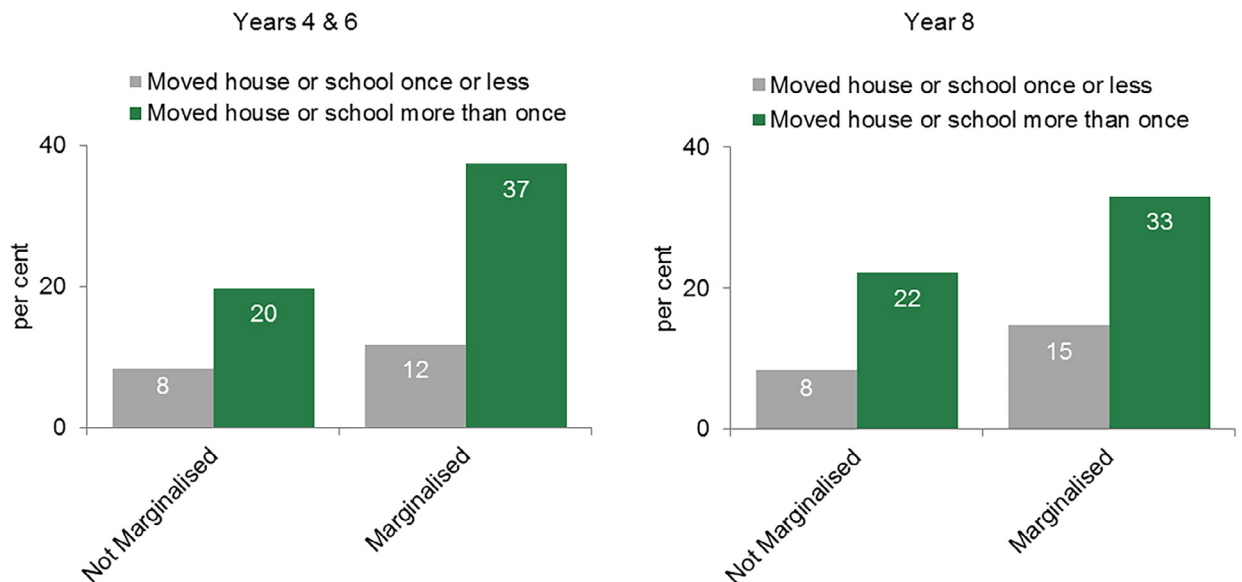
Missing school and frequent moves

Young people who move frequently miss a lot of school

ACWP survey data show that mobility of young people, in terms of moving home or school several times in a short period, is associated with lower attendance rates at school. Fewer than one in twenty non-marginalised young people reported moving home or school twice or more in the year before the survey, compared with one in ten or more of young people with disability, young carers, materially disadvantaged young people, culturally or linguistically diverse young people, and Indigenous young people.

Figure 9 shows that moving home or school twice or more in one year is associated with missing school frequently among both non-marginalised and marginalised participants. Among the non-marginalised participants in all years, one in five of those who had moved twice or more reported missing school at least weekly. Among young people in one or more of the marginalised groups, a third of those moving twice or more reported missing school frequently, compared with 12-15% of marginalised young people who had not moved so often.

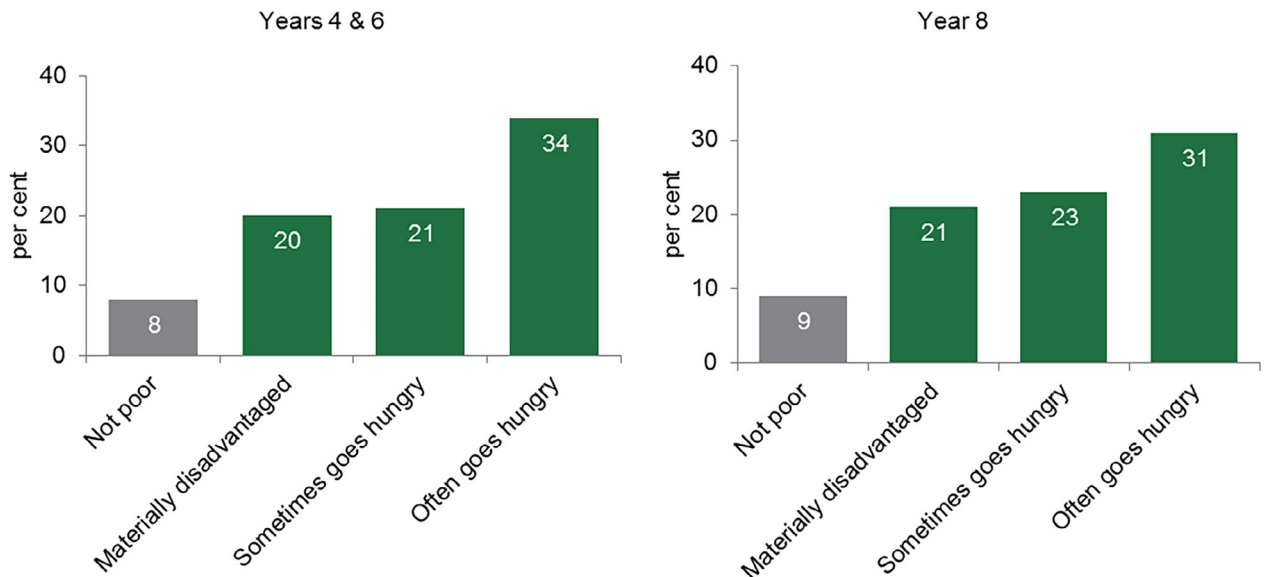
Figure 9: Missing school about once a week or more, by moving house or school twice or more in the past year (per cent)



Missing school and poverty

Figure 10 shows that missing school is associated with both material disadvantage and hunger. Young people who are materially disadvantaged, or who go to school or bed hungry are considerably more likely to report missing school than young people who are not poor – that is, those who are not materially disadvantaged, or who report that they never or rarely go to school or bed hungry.

Figure 10: Missing school about once a week or more, by poverty indicators (per cent)



Disadvantaged young people are more likely to miss school

Some young people we spoke with noted that they did not go to school when there was no food in the house and this often led to regular absences from school. Billie (introduced above) said:

My mum struggles, she gets paid on Thursdays but struggles on the Wednesday. Me and my brother, if there is no food for school, we don't go to school at all. She has never sent us to school with no food.

Taking up special programs or subsidies sometimes makes young people's poverty more visible. Mark, (aged 14) who reported not having enough food at home on a regular basis said that he was teased on the grounds of

Being fat, having glasses. How I go to breakfast club every morning and sometimes I'm late so I bring toast to class and they go, 'oh you still eating Mark'.⁴

These experiences meant he often attempted to convince his mother to let him stay home from school.

⁴ Mark interviewed by the authors for the project *Making a Difference* (Skattebol et al., 2012).

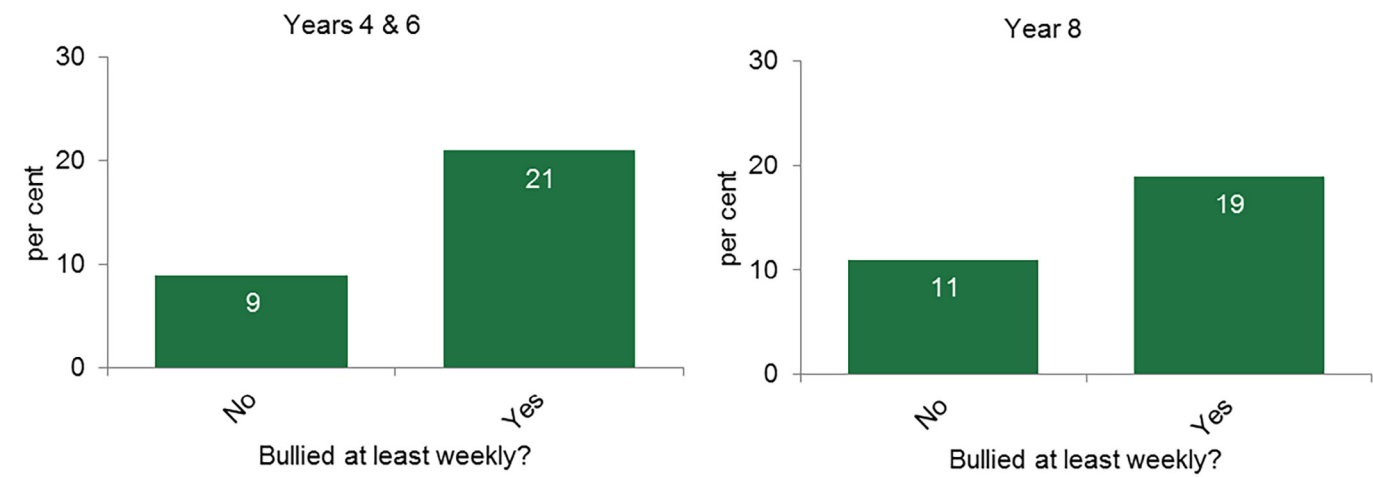


Missing school and bullying

Figure 11 shows that there is a positive relationship between missing school frequently and bullying. Among young people in both Years 4 and 6, and Year 8 who experienced bullying at least weekly, one in five reported missing school about every week or more. This compares with about one in ten participants who reported lower levels of bullying. It may be that participants who are bullied frequently decide to absent themselves from school more often. Alternatively, it is also possible that participants who are absent from school frequently for reasons such as illness may be seen as more vulnerable to bullying. One young person with disability summed up how the experience of bullying made him reluctant to go to school:

I'd like to stay at home most of the time because school's just – oh, it's not tough or anything, it's just, well, I don't like how the other kids act towards me.

Figure 11: Missing school about once a week or more, by frequency of bullying (per cent)



Pressure from schoolwork

Many of the young people who participated in the in-depth research discussed how schoolwork caused them stress. Much of the pressure associated with schoolwork was associated with homework or extra exams:

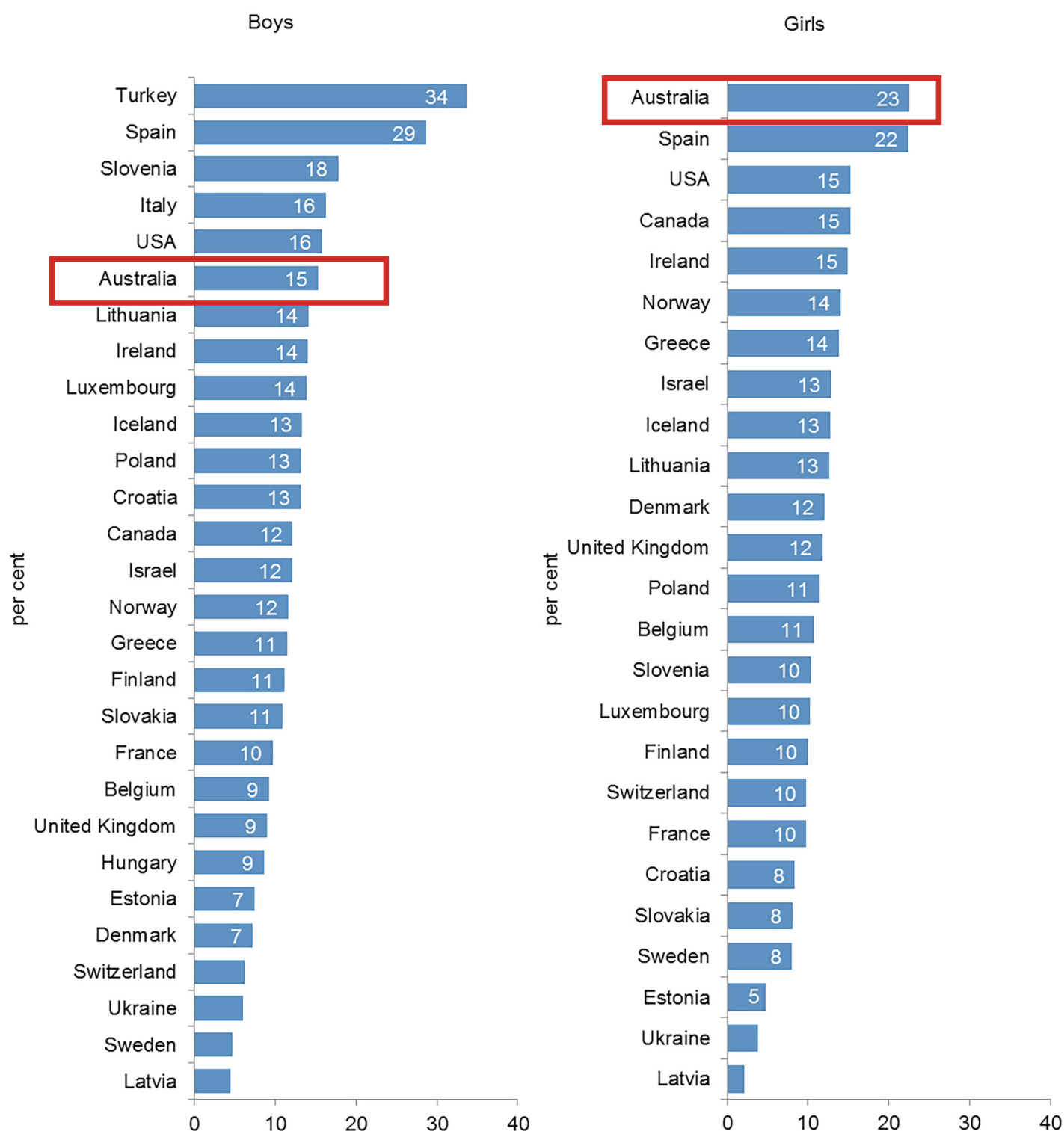
Yeah, just like you do the semester, first one – but when you have a lot of homework or assignments and you can't hang out with your friends or family and can't go to sleep because there's too much work to do and you just want to make sure that you do them all so you get good marks.

Young Australians experience high levels of pressure from schoolwork

Participants in Years 6 and 8 in the ACWP survey were asked to rate the degree of pressure they experienced from schoolwork. This question was taken from an international survey instrument, which allowed comparison of young Australians' responses with those of young people in other countries. About one third of young Australians in Year 6 and half of those in Year 8 reported experiencing 'some' or 'a lot' of pressure. Figure 12 shows that Year 8 boys and girls in Australia (aged about 13-14 years) appear to experience high levels of pressure at school, relative to that reported by students of roughly the same age in other high income countries. Among countries for which data are available, Australia is ranked 6th highest for boys, and 2nd highest for girls in terms of the percentage reporting 'a lot' of pressure from schoolwork.



Figure 12: International comparison of 13-14 year olds reporting ‘a lot’ of school pressure, by sex (per cent)

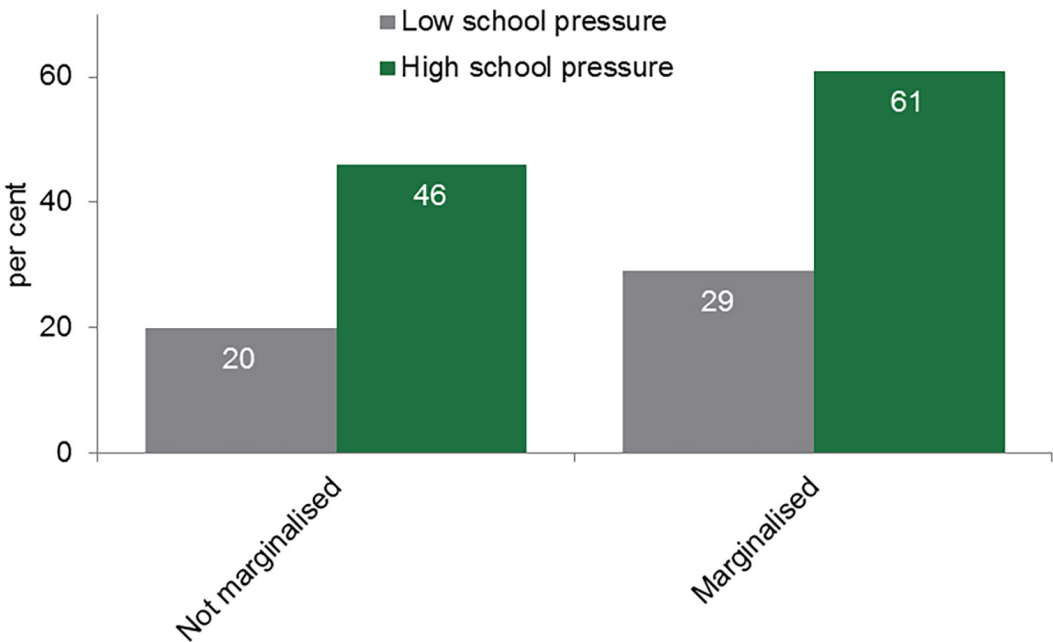


Data source: international data – HBSC. Australian data – ACWP. Percentages are weighted. Comparison between ACWP and HBSC data should be seen as indicative, given different methods of data collection between the two sources.

School pressure is associated with health complaints

Experience of pressure at school is associated with a range of health complaints such as headaches, stomach-aches, feeling low, feeling nervous, and dizziness. Figure 13 displays the relationship between reports of school pressure and reports of health complaints among young people in Year 8. The figure shows that among young people not in any marginalised group, the proportion who reported experiencing two or more health complaints at least every week is more than twice as high (46%) among those who reported high levels of school pressure as it is among those who did not (20%). Among young people in at least one marginalised group who experienced a lot of school pressure, 61% reported two or more health complaints, compared with 29% among those who did not report a lot of pressure from schoolwork.

Figure 13: Young people experiencing two or more health complaints at least weekly, by school pressure (per cent)



Materially disadvantaged young people experience different pressures

The analysis presented here is consistent with international evidence on the association between pressure from schoolwork and health outcomes (Hesketh, Zhen, Lu et al., 2010). It is also evident from young people’s detailed discussions with the researchers for this project. However, these discussions suggested that the type of pressure that young people experienced appeared to vary among some of the groups. Young people from adequately resourced families were more likely to highlight the stress associated with doing well academically at school while those from materially disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to highlight the stress involved in going to school and meeting school requirements regarding issues such as dress code, equipment for class, and behaviour. Sam, a non-marginalised participant in detailed discussions, stated:

You want a job to get money. Tests get in your way because you’re so stressed about it, which is sometimes why kids fail because they’re too scared, “Oh, I’m not going to get this right, I can’t do it.” So they would think they can’t do it when they can but they’re just doubting themselves. They’re stressing.

Judy, another non-marginalised participant, talked about how stress from homework impacted her health:

Judy: *Sometimes when your brain's really active and full-on and you're just going, going, going and you don't stop, and then when you hop into bed you just can't get to sleep. And that's my problem as well. You just can't switch your brain off and you can't relax because you're always on the go, it gets pretty tiring, and you just want to drop. You just want the whole world to swallow you.*

Facilitator: *Do you get sick sometimes? Or do you – you want the whole world to swallow you?*

Judy: *Yes. Well, I do sometimes get sick. I got a big headache just last week, I think, from – like I had a lot of homework and I was really hot, and I just couldn't handle it. I was just really hot with a big headache.*

Nonetheless, while students in these groups found schoolwork stressful, they had strongly internalised the idea that schoolwork should be embraced as necessary for doing well, regardless of the stress involved. While many of the young people in economically disadvantaged groups also clearly valued learning through schoolwork and homework, they talked also about different challenges:

Facilitator: *You said if you really want to do homework you have to go somewhere.*

Madison: *Oh yeah, I had an assignment due on the next day and I had to go out somewhere and I got a flu for about a month.*

Facilitator: *Oh, so you did it outside in the cold?*

Madison: *Yeah, it was like 12 degrees.*

Stress associated with homework was sometimes compounded with stress associated with other difficulties in these young people's lives, as Casey reported:

School work is always with other things, maybe you're getting bullied or just something really bad has happened and just maybe the parents are being really strict on you. Yeah, there's lots of things that can cause stress.

Others did not see the value of homework and opted out even when this meant getting in trouble, or felt there were more important things to do:

Brendan: *You need socialise and be outside, and we're stuck inside doing homework.*

Facilitator: *Okay, so you think there's too much homework?*

Brendan: *Exactly.*

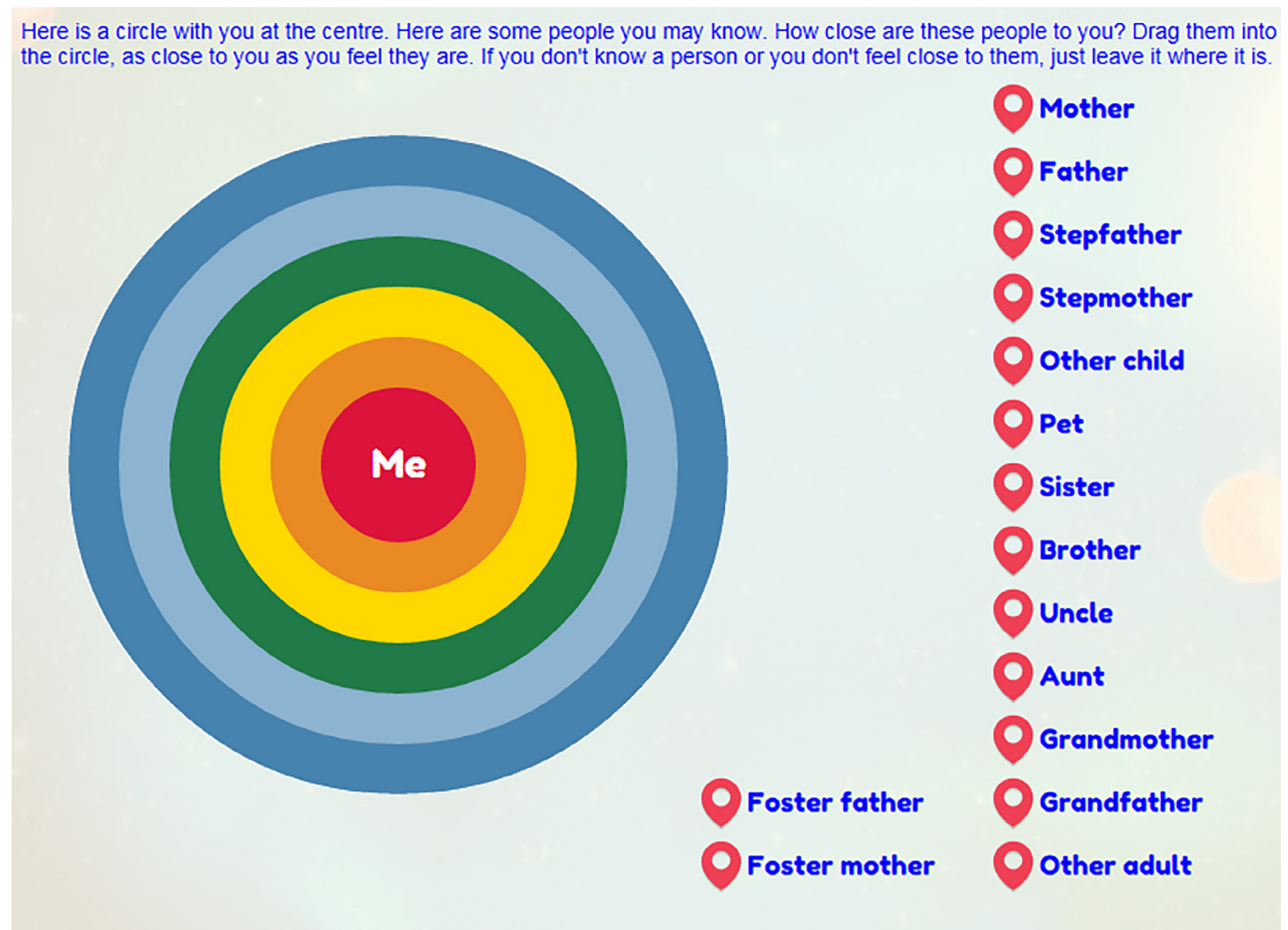
Moreover, schooling costs appeared to cause stress for young people in materially disadvantaged circumstances. Some young people discussed the cost of uniforms, or the price of food in the school tuck shop – issues that did not arise among young people in the middle class group.

To summarise, pressure from schoolwork, given the relatively high percentage of Australian boys and girls who report experiencing 'a lot' of pressure, is an important issue for policy and research in the Australian context. Moreover, in-depth interviews with marginalised young people suggest that pressure to do well at school may be displaced by other pressures and expectations, for example, pressure relating to material disadvantage.

Support networks

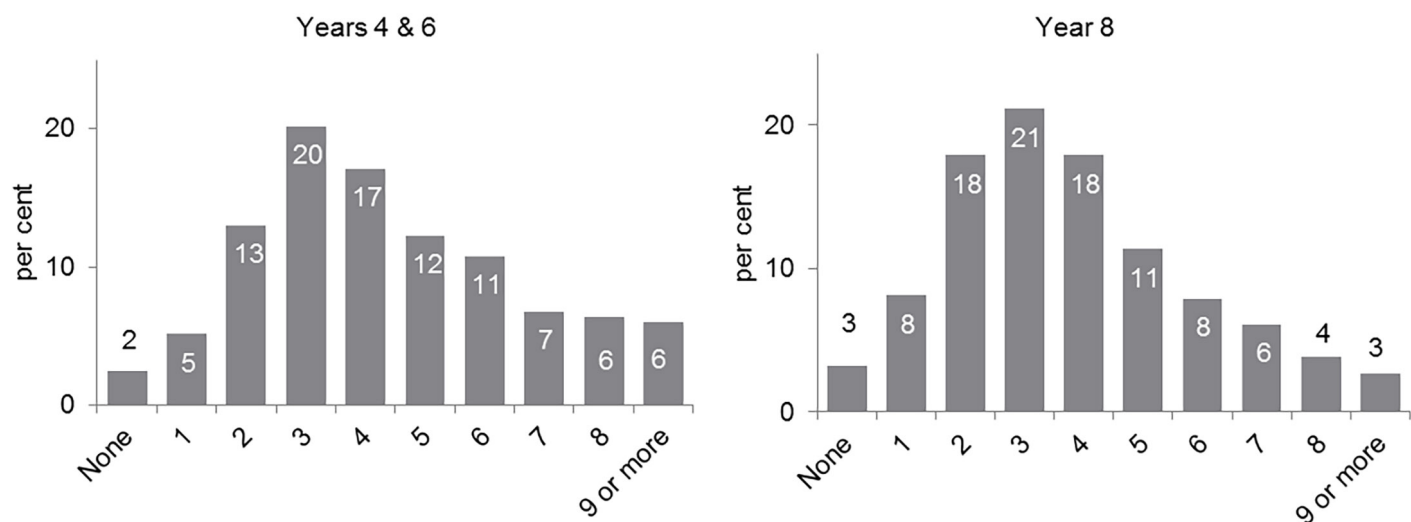
In order to develop a picture of support networks available to young people, ACWP survey participants were asked to rate how close they felt to family members and other people. Figure 14 shows a screenshot of one question in the online survey where young people were asked to drag people on the right of the screen as close to ME! as they wanted, depending on how close they felt to them. The question allowed participants to drag multiple persons into the rings, for example, multiple sisters or brothers.

Figure 14: Screenshot of ME! Circle as appeared in survey



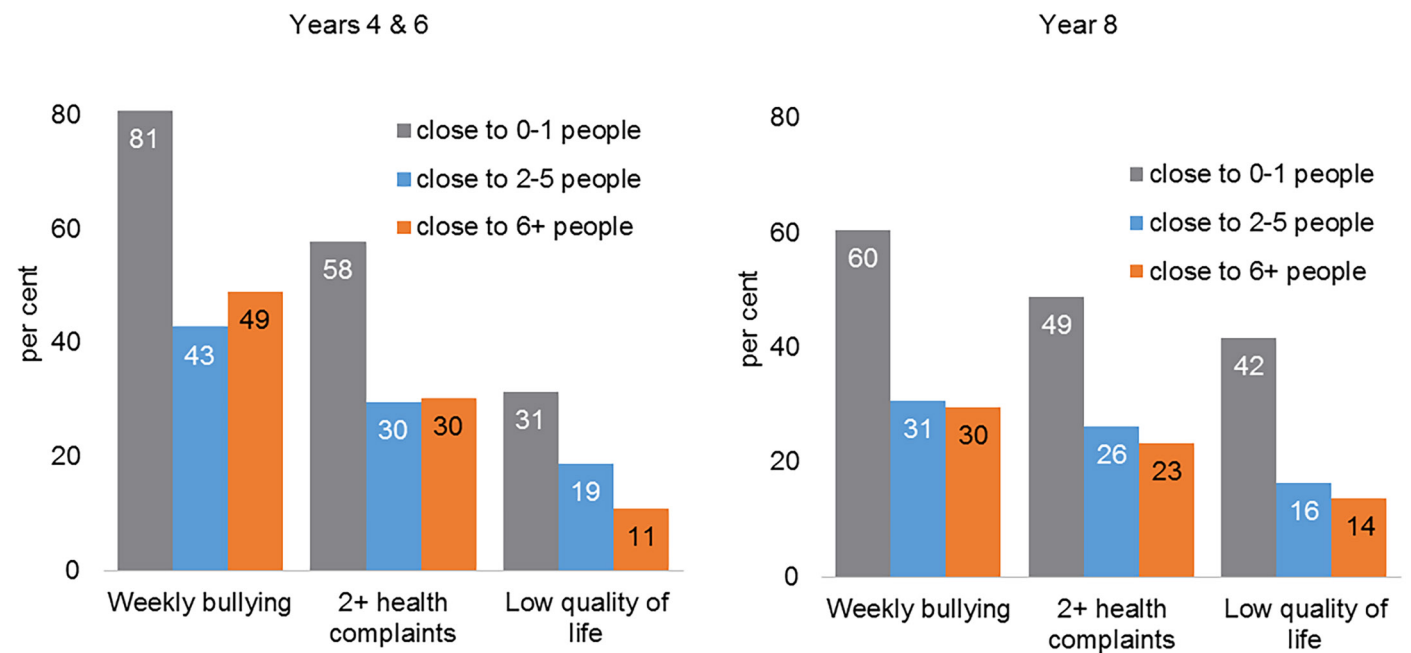
On average, participants dragged about four people into the closest ring to them, two people into the second ring and one person into the third ring. Only about a third of participants put anyone in the outermost ring. However there was a wide range in the number of people that participants dragged into the different rings. Figure 15 shows that 7 per cent of young people in Years 4 and 6, and 11 per cent of Year 8s dragged no-one, or just one person, into the closest ME! ring. The majority in both years dragged between two and five people into the closest ring, while 30% of young people in Years 4 and 6, and 21% in Year 8 dragged six or more people into the closest ring.

Figure 15: Number of people who the participant is very close to (per cent)



The number of people who participants dragged into the closest ME! ring appears to be related to outcomes across a number of domains, as Figure 16 shows. The incidence of frequent bullying, high levels of health complaints, and low quality of life are all notably higher among young people who report being very close to nobody or just one person, compared with the incidence of these three outcomes among young people who report having close relationships with two or more people.

Figure 16: Weekly bullying, two or more health complaints and low quality of life scores, by number of people who the participant is very close to (per cent)



The role of support networks as a protective factor for wellbeing emerged strongly in in-depth discussions with young people. Aaron, an Indigenous boy who lived in materially disadvantaged circumstances, talked at length about the reciprocal relations within his family networks. Many of his most important interactions occurred outside of his family home. His Aunty was instrumental in enabling his access to resources within and outside of school. She negotiated with the school principal for subsidies on his behalf, managed all his timetabling and transport requirements, and



used her organisational skills to manage his football team. Her role in extracurricular activities enabled the children in her family to have activity based contact with children in much wider social networks.

Importantly to Aaron, he contributed to his family by providing daily care to his sick grandparents who were also active participants in his development and learning. Aaron expressed a strong sense of efficacy as he described his daily contributions to their care, and a sense of appreciation that his Aunty enabled him to have opportunities to mix widely.

While it is generally accepted that strong open support networks are important for informing young people about opportunities, enabling them to access opportunities, and providing them with the 'soft skills' to help them negotiate the social world, this has historically been a difficult area for policy intervention. There are some examples of community programs (both commonwealth and state funded) which aim to support parents and carers to develop wider support networks - such Communities for Children and Family by Family programs which operate in disadvantaged communities in Australia. These programs enable families to develop the networks which foster the resource sharing apparent in Aaron's social networks.

Young people in out of home care and in rural and remote Australia

As noted above one of the marginalised groups of focus for the project was young people in out of home care. In focus group discussions and interviews, young people in this group, like young people in the other groups, ranked family as the most important domain for their wellbeing, but it was clear that family was a difficult concept for them to discuss. For example, in a discussion about bullying, one young person stated:

Yeah. Well, there's name calling that's really mean, like saying someone's fat even though they're not just so that you can get all the attention and saying that you told them or something, like there's the - you just got [owned] or something. At home there might be parents fighting with each other or parents hitting the children.

Young people in out of home care had mixed feelings about school. Like young people in some of the other groups, young people in out of home care tended to emphasise school as a place to establish and maintain their friendships, and for general socialising.

Like, when we go on holidays and you don't want to go back to school but you do because you want to see your friends again...where we can talk and hang out and everything.

Although the number of young people in out of home care who were participants in the survey was small (84 across Years 4, 6 and 8), indicators for this group were low, as Table 1 shows. Young people in out of home care were considerably more likely than non-marginalised young people to go to school or be hungry, move house or school, miss school frequently, experience high levels of health complaints, and report frequent bullying. They were also much more likely than young people in the mainstream to rate their quality of life as low, and to have smoked or been drunk in the 30 days before the survey.



Table 1: Summary indicators for young people in out of home care, young people in rural and remote Australia, and non-marginalised young people

| Indicator | Not Marginalised | Out of Home Care | Rural and remote |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | % (n) | % (n) | % (n) |
| Lives in household where no adults are in paid work | 1.0 (33) | 11.4 (8) | 2.8 (3) |
| Often goes to school or bed hungry because there is not enough food at home | 1.9 (65) | 12.5 (9) | 9.4 (10) |
| Sometimes goes to school or bed hungry because there is not enough food at home | 11.5 (397) | 37.5 (27) | 33.0 (35) |
| Moved house or school more than once in the past year | 4.0 (135) | 20.0 (14) | 8.9 (9) |
| Missed school once a week or more last term | 8.4 (266) | 31.7 (19) | 24.7 (22) |
| Experienced at least 2 health complaints at least weekly | 24.6 (819) | 45.5 (30) | 37.5 (36) |
| Was bullied at least weekly | 10.6 (369) | 34.7 (26) | 18.5 (20) |
| Reports low quality of life | 15.1 (532) | 42.7 (32) | 21.8 (24) |
| Smoked in the past month | 1.47 (45) | 9.30 (4) | 6.7 (4) |
| Been drunk in the past month | 2.55 (78) | 16.67 (7) | 6.9 (4) |

Note: data are unweighted

In focus group discussions, young people in rural and remote Australia also rated family as the most important domain. Like other groups too, they generally liked school, and appeared to view learning as important. However, the indicators on Table 1 from the 120 young people in rural and remote areas who completed the survey suggest a notable degree of disadvantage in some domains experienced by young people in this group. High proportions reported going to school or bed hungry. High proportions also reported frequent health complaints.

Policy implications

To summarise findings in this report, indicators of wellbeing in the domains of family, school, health and relationships with peers are positive for most young people. However, a large minority experience low wellbeing. The study shows how contexts matter, and how outcomes in one domain of young peoples' lives are associated with outcomes in other domains. The relationship between hunger or material disadvantage and low school engagement is one example of these associations. The relationship between pressure from schoolwork and health complaints is another.

Low wellbeing, linked across multiple domains, is an issue for policy because it can lead to lost opportunities for young people's healthy development, and for development of their human and social capital. The findings in this report suggest that young people in one or more marginalised groups are more likely than young people who are not marginalised to experience low wellbeing – for example, more health complaints, more challenges at school, and more bullying. While these findings are preliminary and need further substantiation, they are consistent with findings from Australian and international literature on the linkages between different aspects of wellbeing.

Joined-up approaches

Policy needs to be more active in recognising and working with these associations. While wellbeing should not be directly equated with mental health, it is useful in this respect to cite the Australian Government's (2015) recent [response](#) to the [Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services](#):

This is an area where efforts have been particularly fragmented and have operated in silos, failing to connect providers, families and schools to information and supports which are needed to get the best services and outcomes for children. Children need a supportive school and family environment, and need to build resilience skills and protective factors to help promote a mentally healthy life. Children at heightened risk of mental illness and their families and carers need to be able to access health and broader social support services, be assisted by professionals who are able to identify early problems and intervene early, and have access to services which they are likely to feel comfortable using. (p.21)

The key points in the Australian Government's response – that providers in health, education and other areas of service design and delivery need to coordinate their actions across policy silos, that children need a supportive school and family environment, and that children and their families need be able to access services that they are comfortable using – are echoed in The Department of Social Services' current [Action Plan](#) for protecting Australia's children.

Coordination across silos is firmly on the policy agenda. Such an approach is supported by what young people told researchers on this project. Young people who are marginalised can clearly see the links between their own and their families' health, the material and other resources available to them, and their approach to – and engagement with - education. Coordination will facilitate policy in explicitly making those connections too, so that families have sufficient resources to ensure that young people do not go to school or bed hungry, and that schools adapt better to the needs of young people who are marginalised.

Listening young people

The underlying premise of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project is that young people, particularly young people in their middle years, are competent individuals, and experts in their own lives. If services are to effectively engage and support young people, then policymakers need to actively listen to young people, and monitor their wellbeing over the long term, to track progress towards improving outcomes for all young people. This should include:

- Build into policy reform processes ongoing consultations with young people on what a service that they are comfortable with would look like.
- Agree, in consultation with young people and other stakeholders, priority areas for policy action across interconnected domains (family, school, health, peer relations, material disadvantage).
- Monitor progress towards reducing disadvantage and marginalisation so that all young people can access the supports and opportunities that services such as education and health care provide.

Many of these steps are already being undertaken. For example, the [NSW Youth Health Policy 2011-2016](#) recognises the importance of consultation with young people on health services that are aimed at them. Jurisdictional authorities across Australia encourage students at primary and secondary levels to be involved in student representative councils. Children's Commissioners in states and territories across the country have engaged in wide-ranging consultations with young people on a range of issues, including wellbeing. Nonetheless, consultation with young people does not appear to be mainstreamed in policy. With respect to The Department of Social Services' current [Action Plan](#) for protecting Australia's children, in May 2015 the [Australian Children's Commissioner and Guardians Group](#) emphasised the need for "a solid commitment to ongoing, meaningful, and respectful consultation with children and young people about the Plan and issues important to them."

Monitoring progress

Monitoring of young people's wellbeing through their middle years has been a recent focus of attention for the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The AIHW (which has actively supported the Australian Child Wellbeing Project) has developed sets of headline indicators for the development and wellbeing of both [children](#) (aged 0-12 years) and [youth](#) (aged 12-24 years), and a user-friendly [National Youth Information Framework](#). These initiatives are vital for developing an overall summary picture of trends in young people's wellbeing.

However, more complex ongoing monitoring, mirroring the more complex coordination of policy across portfolios such as is now being undertaken in mental health and child protection services, needs to be intensified if the success of these approaches is to be adequately evaluated. This should include monitoring of young people's own perspectives on their lives, their wellbeing, and the services that are provided for them. Such information will support policymakers in evaluating trends in marginalisation and their implications for the perpetuation of disadvantage through generations. It will also allow reassessment of the connections between the different domains of young people's wellbeing, and the effectiveness of services. Finally, well-designed ongoing and internationally comparable monitoring will give policymakers the information they need on the health and development of young people in Australia comparison with that in other countries. National tests and international comparisons on academic achievement provide vital information on the learning performance of Australian students. Ongoing monitoring and international comparisons in the broader aspects of young people's wellbeing will give policymakers the opportunity to assess progress in maximising opportunities for all young people, and draw lessons from the best performing jurisdictions on young people's healthy development and the factors that influence it.

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